

Drew, J. M.
The song-birds of North America.

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THE SONG-BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA.

BY

THOMAS M. BREWER.

ATLANTIC ALMANAC FOR 1869.

there is no selfish encroachment upon the highway. A scrupulous regard for neatness is counted, and very justly, as an element of the town's prosperity. Strangers are attracted by it; those who wander from it in youth are drawn toward it in age. Its paths are paths of pleasantness.

I wish to goodness that Tom Traft would clear up the highway at his door!

Again, — and this matter does no way concern Tom Traft, whom I leave henceforth at his spading, — every good roadside in the land should have its trees; and what trees shall they be?

Maples, you say: well, the maple is an honest tree, a free-grower, hardy, and cleanly; but the sugar-maple — which is the favorite among them — is disposed in its mature years to make of its top a dense thicket, through which there is no free flow of the winds, and for this reason, unless judiciously and regularly trimmed, is hardly to be commended as a tree to shade one's doorstep. The crimson-flowering and the silver-leaf are more open in their habit, but not so sturdy growers, and never or rarely coming to the same grand proportions. The Norway and the Scotch maples have their special excellences, but they are not of a kind to commend them for introduction along our highroads. It is quite a common practice in putting out the sugar-maple along new streets to cut it squarely off at some twelve or fourteen feet from the ground. Necessity may command this, but it is open to two serious objections: first, the new shoots all starting from one point make a dense thicket, and, crowding each other as they do, forbid a free and natural development of the tree; or, again, if only one or two shoots start from the surface at or near the point of excision, the maple grows up with two leading shoots nearly equal in strength, and, the dead wood of the old stem preventing firm union, there is great liability to split, and leave only the half of a tree. Care to secure one prominent leading shoot is the best precaution.

The European linden and its American congener, the basswood, are both noble trees, not tempting to insects (save the bee to its blossoms); but the former variety is disposed to that density of shade already hinted at in the case of the sugar-maple, and so making it a questionable tree for the immediate neighborhood of the house. The "button-ball," which twenty years ago stretched its white arms athwart so many village streets, is now unfortunately gone by; consumption is in its family. I have made various experiments upon scattered specimens within my own enclosure, in the hope of renewing its vigor, but in vain. We rail at it now that we have lost it; but its open habit of growth (giving free passage to the air), its great glossy leaves, its picturesque splotches of color upon bole and limb, its dangling balls of seed, round as a bull's-eye, were not without their charms; and I shall never forget a certain line of gaunt fellows (sycamores, we called them), beside which, for many and many a day, I strode to school, in years long gone, watching the swaying tassels, wondering at the painted trunks.

If we could only put the oaks and the hickories along our roadside! For the hickories, it should be the smooth-barked (pignut, in boy-talk); and for the oak, it should be the white, or the gray, or the yellow bark, and (if we could have it) the magnificent water-oak of the South. The taproot of these trees, which renders them so impatient of removal, will always retard the general introduction of them as shade-trees; beside which their comparatively slow growth (this is not true of the hickory in favorable soils) will stand as another objection. Yet by all means let us leave them religiously untouched wherever we find them in position, and let us coax them from time to time to fill vacant spaces.

Have I forgotten the elm? *Merci!* have I forgotten the Lady Macbeth under all the rustle of the "Birnam wood"?

Yet what if it should prove that the elm is touched with a disease that shall make a wreck of it, as it has made of the button-wood? There are, within a few years past, some bad indications, — a paucity of leafage, an early yellowing in the autumn, a lack of the old vigor. These indications are not indeed so apparent, if apparent at all, in the year of our writing ('68); but in 1866 and 1867 they were in many quarters most decided. The canker-worm, too, has given it a hard strain; to lose a great dome of leafage in the very fulness of the season, and straightway to repair the loss, is a staggering matter for the most stalwart tree. It is like Carlyle's loss (by burning) of all the manuscript of the "French Revolution"; he re-wrote it indeed; but the loss and the ensuing task-work aged him as ten ordinary summers might not have done. I shall not attempt to decide between the pendulous, graceful form of the drooping elm, and the sturdy self-assertion of (what we call) the English elm. Juno is magnificent, and we say it freely; but when we catch sight of the stately Jupiter with his broad head braving the clouds, we wait for a term in the which to coin our admiration.

There are towns we could name that live upon the reputation of their elms; there are streets which, without their elms, would be no streets at all. No trees make so wondrous a lap of their branches overhead, as we go down their aisles; none keep alive so pointedly the old fable of the Gothic arch, — the fable I mean of its having sprung from studies of the forest. There is a certain University town, which some of us know, which has a standing miracle of this sort on one of its central streets. It would be a beauty forever, — if only the elms would live forever.

The misfortune is that the good people of the town are so boastful of their trees that they are blinded to the necessity of any further adornment of street or city. To the forecast and taste and enterprise of one citizen, — long since dead, — they owe their trees; and with the odor of his memory and his deeds, they regale themselves and are sated; while an adjoining city of half its population has, by a slight of enterprise and faith and daring, converted a mud waste into a gem of a city garden, and so quintupled the value of all outlying lands, and made the little Hartford Park a beauty and a joy forever (for parks never die, as forests die), the city of Elms hugs its traditions and its trees, and rests stagnant; — stagnant and shameless, while its railway station — where four great lines of traffic concentre — is a by-word and a stench throughout New England.

And now, even as I write, it is understood that there is to be a spoiling of the elms; huge dormitories are to rise upon the College campus, — the elms making way for them, — and their brick backs to be thrust upon the street that bounds the most beautiful spot of the town. This extravagant leap of brick and mortar into the elms and lawn is understood to be primarily for the sake of sparing existing buildings, and secondarily to secure some approach in the general arrangement to the quadrangle of the English colleges.

But what on earth does an American college want of a quadrangle, which originally supposed a great portal and a porter and closed gates? Shall we have a proctor? Will the ruin of this old quiet green, with its outlook upon the larger green around which the town lies sleeping, find compensation in any mansard roof or pavilions they may contrive? Will the *dissecta membra* of present edifices, each of its own style and with its own architect, gain anything by the quadrangulation? Can any new campus behind — with the broad eastern outlook upon elms and churches and lines of houses and slopes of lawn forever shut out — be equal to the old?

Once more, at least, before the final despoilment, I hope to wander under those old trees, brush once more, though with foot less elastic than of old, that greensward where we lay on the

long June afternoons, — courting the breezes that whispered through the elm-tops, — courting the glances that flashed upon us (rarely, to be sure) from maidenly eyes, — courting the future with brave promises (so many of them broken).

We counted eighty, or near it, then; some fifty now; thirty dropped by the roadside.

May they rest in peace!

THE SONG-BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA.

BY THOMAS M. BEEVER.

CAN any theme be presumed more replete with attractions, or one at the same time more filled with discouraging and disheartening suggestions? Certainly no subject can more abound with the charms of variety, the attractions of marvellous beauties, or with blending inspirations of association and recollection, derived from past enjoyments. It is all the more, because we meet on the threshold this untold wealth, — it is because we feel, almost instinctively, that the music of our birds, with all its infinitude of sweet charms, is still a theme to do full justice to which mortal pen is all inadequate, that we bespeak the indulgent consideration of the reader. We can, it is true, tell you some things in regard to the local habitation and the name of most of our more noted musicians. We can mark the boundaries within which most of them may be found, during the pleasant season. We can tell when they come, and when they leave for parts known or unknown, and various other minor incidental peculiarities touching the private history of each and all; and this is not without more or less of intrinsic interest. But to do full and adequate justice to our singing-birds as musicians, to set before our readers the peculiar and individual merits of any one of our songsters, as a vocalist, that is indeed a task for which we, in the beginning, must plead the incompetence of uninspired humanity. As we may not represent on mortal canvas a perfect picture of the more glorious wonders of physical nature, still less can any one describe the vocal beauties of the grove. To be able to judge in either case with entire accuracy, one must see or hear in very person. It is not a case where we can trust to the ears of another, but one which seems to contradict those oft-quoted lines of Horace, wherein he tells us that

"What we hear
With weaker passion will affect the heart,
Than when the faithful eye beholds the part."

And then again, all this exuberance of wealth, this apparently inexhaustible character of our subject, almost appals us by its vastness. Our space would hardly hold the names even of the two hundred and ninety-seven species which our learned *savant* at Washington classes among the *Oscines*, or singing-birds of North America! Happily for us, and yet more happily for our present purpose, they do not all sing, although they ought so to do, at least in theory. They are all said to possess that peculiar apparatus for singing, composed of five pairs of muscles, upon which the very learned Dr. Cabanis has founded his new and most revolutionary order of birds, which do or ought to sing, and which he calls *Oscines*.

We call this new order revolutionary, because it seems to be playing the very mischief with every previous mode of classification in ornithology. If not utterly overturning the various systems of the great men of the past, such as Linnaeus, Cuvier, Swainson, Temminck, Gray, etc., it certainly opens a wide breach in every other previous mode of arrangement. And if we may be pardoned this digression, we must plead guilty to a very rebel-

lious frame of mind towards this new system, when we are told that by it our well-known and favorite *Phoebe*, whose welcome notes are among the first to hail our tardy spring, that our common *King-bird*, and the *Wood Pewee*, who were among our boyhood's favorite songsters, are unceremoniously counted out of this order; that they, forsooth, are not "singers," but are to be ranked as *Clamatores*, or "screechers"; while such delightful vocalists as the *Crow*, the *Raven*, the *Magpie*, the *Jay*, the *Grackles*, birds whose monotonous and discordant cries are "notes so often renewed as to be at a decided discount," are (Heaven save the mark!) singing-birds. When we follow our worthy systematist to such an absurd conclusion as this, we can only infer that either he must have been misinterpreted, or that there is somewhere an important screw loose in his system itself.

But to go back to our subject, and to our song-birds. How often have foreign tourists, and our own superficial observers, dwelt upon our poverty in this country in respect to our singing-birds! The former miss here the notes of the *Skylark*, the *Mavis*, the *Nightingale*, the *Blackbird*, and many others of their most familiar vocalists. They fail, therefore, to appreciate our boundless wealth in respect to other singing-birds of equal and even of superior powers. All of these we may not hope, in our short space, to be able to present to the notice of our readers. We will only endeavor to make brief mention of a few of the more noticeable. Among these we shall include several of those least known to most of us.

Nor is it true, though the fact may be new to many, that we have in North America no genuine *bona fide* Skylark. We do possess a very superior representative, and one said to be very nearly or quite equal, in its powers of song, to the bird immortalized in the verses of Shelley and the Ettrick Shepherd. There is found in our far Northwestern regions, on the barren and unattractive table-lands of Dacotah, a bird which, in its peculiar and remarkable powers of song, and in its general habits, is an almost exact reproduction of the Skylark of Europe. Our great bird-painter, Audubon, was the first to meet with it in 1843, near the junction of the Missouri and the Yellowstone Rivers. He called it *Sprague's Skylark*, in honor of one of our Massachusetts naturalists. It has since been found in the British Possessions, still farther north.

Our friend and brother ornithologist, the late Edward Harris of New Jersey, who was one of Mr. Audubon's party, was so completely deceived by the sound of the music of these Skylarks that, for a long while, he sought for them on the ground. Their voices seemed to come to him, from the prairies around. It was only after having crossed and recrossed them, to no purpose, that he at last discovered that the exquisitely trilling notes he was listening to with so much delight proceeded from several of these birds, who were soaring at so great an elevation above him as to be almost lost to view. At times some of them actually did disappear from sight, even in the wonderfully clear and transparent atmosphere of that country. As they rose from the ground, these Skylarks flew in an undulating manner, and continued to rise in increasing circles, until, when about a hundred yards high, they began to sing. After a while, suddenly closing their wings, they would glide down to the prairie below.

Passing by, for the present, our unsurpassed and unapproachable *Mocking-bird*, which, in the power, compass, variety, and exquisite harmony of its own original and unimitative music, very far transcends any rival, native or foreign, we will here mention that the finest vocalist which has fallen under our own immediate observations was met with by us in the thick and swampy woods of Eastern Maine and New Brunswick. Its song is equally wonderful in respect to the sweetness, the brilliancy, the power, the compass, and the variety of the notes. It begins with low, soft

notes, of surpassing sweetness and melody, and rises gradually higher and higher until the listener becomes lost in wonder, admiration, and delight, at the transcendent power and beauty of its song. We certainly know of nothing that compares with it, among our New England birds. We must here regretfully add, that we are not positive as to the identity of this wonderful songster. We long supposed that we had positively ascertained it to be the *Black-Poll Warbler*, having, as we at the time imagined, taken one of these birds in the very act of producing these wonderful melodies. But it is quite probable we were mistaken, and, by some unlucky accident, did not obtain the real musician. Certain it is, that several of our friends who are well-informed ornithologists, and are familiar with the notes of the *Black-Poll*, are positive that they by no means equal or resemble our description of the song of this unknown musician. We would, therefore, be now entirely at fault as to what our bird could be, were it not that we find among the experiences of Audubon the description of one so very like our own, as to naturally suggest the probability that another individual of the same species with that whose harmony so entranced the great ornithologist may have been the bird to which we also listened with unmixed delight. Unfortunately, the bird to which we refer is one not familiar to most of us, and has no suggestive English name. Audubon calls it the *Ruby-crowned Kinglet*. Wilson, in his poverty of appellatives, speaks of it as a Wren; but it is nothing of the kind, and is a bird of well-marked specific peculiarities.

Mr. Audubon tells us, in the narrative to which we refer, that once, when he was rambling over the deserts of Labrador, and was listening to the harmonious sounds that filled the air around, suddenly the notes of a warbler quite new to him fell upon his ear. Its song was fully as sonorous as that of the *Canary*, and much richer in its melody. It was not only as powerful and as clear, but much more varied and pleasing to the ear. He secured one of these birds in its very utterance of these sweet sounds, and entertained no doubts as to its identity. This little *Kinglet*, to which he attributes these vocal powers, is a bird no larger than our common Humming-bird. It is quite probable that he was right, and that he obtained the real musician. It is, however, possible that he may have been mistaken, and shot, not the real songster, but a different bird.

Our earliest spring musicians are the *Bluebird* and the *Robin*. Familiar as both birds are to most of us, they deserve something more than a passing mention among the song-birds of this country. Of the *Bluebirds* we have three species, all closely resembling one another, yet sufficiently distinct, and occupying different parts of the continent. Two of these are found in the area between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific. The third is our common *Bluebird* of the East, more or less abundant from Louisiana to Hudson's Bay, and from Cape Cod to the Mississippi. Of all our birds, this bears the closest resemblance in its outward form and colors, and in its habits and general characteristics, to the traditional *Robin Redbreast* of Europe. It does not, it is true, in the winter season, with the same delightful familiarity of which we have so often read, come round our dwellings, or seek the shelter of our roof. Nor would it, like *Robin Redbreast*, pick up the proffered crumb of bread. Its food is exclusively of insects, and it cannot, therefore, well subsist in weather which interferes with its obtaining its prey. We do not therefore meet with it in mid-winter, in any of the more northern States. In the early spring, and throughout the summer, it is found in all parts of the country east of the Mississippi, as far north as the forty-eighth parallel of latitude. How or where these birds pass the winter does not very clearly appear. In the Southern, and even in some of the Middle States, on every mild winter day, the *Bluebirds* will come out from their retreats, wherever these may be, but will all disap-

pear again on the return of severer weather. They are among the first-comers among the early migratory birds, always making their appearance in the first days of March, and once even in Massachusetts as early as the 15th of February. On that occasion, although the weather subsequently became very severe, the thermometer falling to zero, the *Bluebirds* remained, and were, from time to time, observed to be singing, and appearing to be having a good time generally, in spite of the temperature.

Our *Bluebird* is a very pleasing, but is not a powerful or a remarkable singer. His notes are a succession of low and melodious warblings, and are almost exclusively uttered in close proximity to his mate. As his song is usually our first announcement that spring, though yet far distant, is advancing, so, too, his notes may be heard among the very last, and long after most of our other vocalists are mute.

The *Western Bluebird* and the *Arctic Bluebird* are peculiar to the Pacific coast. In their habits, in their appearance, and, indeed, in all other respects than their residence, they very nearly resemble the Eastern species. The song of the first named is said to be even more tender, sweet, and varied than are the notes of our common species. In regard to this, however, our authorities do not agree; Dr. J. G. Cooper, of California, very stoutly maintaining the contrary. The notes of the Arctic species are said to be easily distinguishable from either of the others. Though equally sweet and clear, they are delivered with much less power.

Another of our earliest and most familiar songsters, whose loud and melodious whistle in early spring resounds throughout the length and breadth of our entire continent, is the *Robin*. It is too late now to enter our protest against this absurd misnomer. A *Robin* it is, in Yankee parlance, and so will continue to be called so long as we may continue to hear its delightful music. What need have we to describe its notes? Who of us, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, is not familiar with its powerful, if not varied song, which Audubon tells us can hardly be distinguished from that of the far-famed *Blackbird* of Europe? Like the *Bluebird*, the *Robin*, as he is among the first to open, so he is among the last to close, the vernal concert of nature.

The earnestness, simplicity, and thrilling nature of his song constitute its great charm. Its notes do not exhibit a very great variety, and are thought by different writers to resemble those of other birds, by some being said to resemble the *Brown Thrasher*, by others the *Wood-Thrush* of Europe. Its song, in the still, early summer mornings, seems to pervade all space, and everywhere to be the predominating music. It begins with the first gray of the morning's dawn, and only closes with the last glimmer of the closing twilight. If, as says the old adage, early rising is really calculated to assure wealth and wisdom, combined with good physical health, surely the *Robin* ought to be abundantly blessed in these respects. It is up and in full song long before any one else is astir; so early indeed, and so very soon after its last evening's performance, that one would almost think it could hardly pay for it to retire to roost, devoting, as it does, in the long summer days of June, sixteen or seventeen hours out of the twenty-four to giving its earnest and enthusiastic expression to harmonious sounds.

Belonging to the same family with the *Robin* are several of our best singers. Indeed, the entire family of true thrushes, and all its kith and kin, are musicians. All of them are excellent, and several of them are worthy of special mention. Perhaps the most celebrated of these is the *Wood-Thrush*, of course not the bird bearing the same common name in Europe. Our bird occurs, in summer, from Mexico to New England, Massachusetts being its most northern limit. It is, for the most part, as by some it is not unaptly called, a "bird of the solitude," seeming to prefer dense thickets, low, damp hollows shaded by the dense foliage of

forest trees. But this, though its general, is by no means its universal, habit. We can remember when a small grove near the paternal home, within the present limits of Boston, was the favorite resort of several pairs of these birds, who, year after year, built their nests, reared their young, and filled the neighborhood with their delightful melody, unmindful of the frequent presence of curious and interested children, one, at least, of whom will not soon forget the enjoyment derived from the exquisite sweetness of their music.

One of our most observing young naturalists mentions an even more striking departure of a *Wood-Thrush* from the usual habit of the species. For several successive summers one of these "birds of the solitude" made its home among the elms and maples of Court Square, in the very heart of Springfield, spending the entire season in its immediate vicinity, and pouring out his melodious strains at early dawn, and at various hours of the day, until late in the evening, as undisturbed by the people on the walks beneath him, or the noise and rattle of the vehicles in the contiguous streets, as if he were in his own wild-wood haunts. His superior musical powers caused him to become a well-known and protected favorite, as he familiarly searched for his food along the gravel-walks of that frequented square.

The song of the *Wood-Thrush* is at once attractive and peculiar. No lover of the sweet sounds of nature can fail to notice it, or, having once heard it, knowing its sound can fail to recognize it ever after. Language cannot describe, still less do justice to, the surpassing richness of its melody. It has been compared by Wilson to the double-tonguing of a German flute, or to the tinkling of a small bell. Their whole song consists of five or six distinct parts, the last note of each of which is in such a tone as seemingly to leave the conclusion suspended. The *finale* is finely managed, and is sweeter and sweeter at each successive repetition.

But very little inferior to the *Wood-Thrush*, in their vocal powers, are a group of four or five other distinct, and very closely allied, species. Though not familiar to the unscientific world, and only very recently recognized in all their specific distinctions by our naturalists, they are chiefly known as *Hermit Thrushes*. They all dwell in swampy woods, and are retiring and secluded in their habits.

There are at least seven recognized as different species in this group, but of these two are very little known; and none of them are well identified by common names. One is called *Wilson's Thrush*, and is a common bird throughout New England. The *Ground Swamp-Robin* and the *Olive-backed Thrush* are found in warm weather from Massachusetts to Labrador. *Alice's Thrush*, called also the *Gray-cheeked Thrush*, is found in the same northern latitudes, but farther west, its domain seeming to be from Chicago north, in the central portions of the continent. The *Pacific Thrush* is a bird of Oregon.

All these birds, with a single exception, have a high arctic range. With the notes of the last two mentioned our naturalists are not familiar, or have at least made no mention. They are presumed to be not different from the general character of their kindred. Of the group the *Olive-backed* or *Swainson's Thrush* is decidedly the superior singer. Both this and the more common *Swamp Robin*, as well as our *Wilson's Thrush*, combine sweetness, variety, and exquisite and harmonious tinkling sounds in their notes, which, to our taste, are fully equal to the more famed song of the *Wood-Thrush*. They all have the same peculiar, clear, metallic ring, the same wonderful blending of various sweet sounds, which no one can hear but with delight, or, having heard, fail to remember ever after with a vivid recollection of their charm. When in grief for the loss of its young, the *Olive-backed Thrush* breaks forth with a song of lamentation, very different from the harsh and discordant notes of other birds, under like circumstances, but laments in

notes of surpassing sweetness and plaintive melody, "so piteously sad and wondrous, that our hearts almost broke as we sate and listened."

Closely allied to the thrushes, and equally prominent with them, as among the best song-birds of our country, is another very peculiar group of birds. These also possess no distinctive English name, with a single exception. Their only representative in the Atlantic States is our common and well-known *Brown Thrasher*, or, as others call it, the *Brown* or *Ferruginous Thrush*. But these birds are not true thrushes, and deserve some better and more distinctive name, suggestive of their great merits as vocalists, and their courageous, independent, and beneficent character. Our common Eastern species, so abundant in New England, is found as far west as Texas and the great plains. From thence to the Pacific coast it is replaced by some five or six different species, all very closely resembling it in the ferruginous colors of its plumage, its long curved bill, and its peculiar elongated tail, and its general habits, which include vocal powers of the highest order.

The song of our *Thrasher* (we use this name only because we have no other, and with a protest against its unfitness) is loud, full of emphasis, variety, and beauty. Its notes are always original, never imitative, and cannot well be mistaken for those of any other of our song-birds. They are said to bear a very close resemblance to the notes of the European *Wood-Thrush*. It is a very steady performer, singing whole hours at a time, and its notes are given forth in so loud a tone, that its song may often be heard at points remarkably far distant from the performer.

Next to our Eastern species, the three most common varieties of this group are the *Curve-bill*, the *Long-bill*, and the *Californian* species. These are all referred to by writers as "thrushes" and as "mocking-birds." But this is inaccurate. They are not properly thrushes, nor are any of them imitative in their notes. The first two are found abundant from Western Texas to Mexico and California. The last named is abundant only on the seacoast of California, having a somewhat restricted distribution.

The *Curve-bill* is described by the late Dr. Heermann as possessing musical powers surpassed by few other birds. He always found it on the topmost branch of a *Mesquite* tree, pouring forth its copious and gushing melodies. General Couch, whose success in the domains of natural science was undoubted and a valuable, whatever it may have since been in the field of politics, also met with these birds near Durango, in Mexico. They had already paired in February, and were very tame and gentle. He describes their notes or song as quite melodious, and withal very attractive. Perched on the topmost bough of the flowering mimosa, the male bird, in the presence of his consort, poured forth a volume of the most enchanting music.

The best musician belonging to this group is, probably, the Californian species, — the *Harporhynchus redivivus* of Professor Baird. Dr. Heermann, who first described its vocal powers, speaks of it as pouring forth a flood of melody equalled by that of the Mocking-bird alone. Colonel McCall, — since better known to his countrymen as General McCall, and a gallant commander, wounded in McClellan's ill-starred Peninsular campaign, — an accurate and observing naturalist, wrote to his friend John Cassin, of Philadelphia, that the notes of this species flowed with such exquisite sweetness as to place it almost beyond rivalry among the countless songsters that enliven the woods of America, or even of the world. And yet it is as retiring and as simple in its manners as it is brilliant in song. In its power of modulating sweet sounds it is not surpassed even by the more ambitious *Mocking-bird*. The same writer ranks the song of this species as very far superior to that of our *Brown Thrasher*; but adds that, although it is without the powerful voice or the imitative powers of the true *Mocking-bird*,

it yet has a liquid mellowness of tone, united with a clearness of expression and a volubility of utterance, which cannot be surpassed, and hardly approached. The warmth and pathos of its song are so truly remarkable as to fill the listener with wonder and delight.

We have mentioned several of the more remarkable songsters belonging to the family of American thrushes. All the members of the several groups to which we have referred are natural singers; each possesses its own distinctive song. They are never imitative. One remarkable variety remains to be mentioned, which we may designate as *Mocking Thrushes*. So far as we are aware, there are but three species of these north of Mexico. They were once classed in a single genus, very appropriately named *Orpheus*; but are now separated by systematists, more particular than wise, into three distinct sub-genera. These are our far-famed *Mocking-bird*, the *Mountain Mocking-bird*, and our common and familiar *Cat-bird*.

Those who have never enjoyed the privilege of listening to the song of the *Mocking-bird*, pure and uncontaminated with imitations of the grosser sounds of cities and large towns, can form but a very inadequate conception of the wonderful beauty and variety, or of the rapid transitions, with which it will present in a few seconds the songs of an almost innumerable number of other birds. Our city-bred performer is wont to injure the beauty and the harmony of its concert by a grotesque intermixture of strange and inharmonious sounds. The crowing of a cock, the creaking of wheels, the scream and rattle of the distant locomotive, and other rude sounds from the streets, will often be heard blending with its sweetest notes. Yet nothing can well be imagined more marvellous in its beauties than the song—if we may use so poor and inexpressive a term—of this bird, when reared among its own native Alleghanies. It bears but a very faint resemblance to the medley, wonderful as that may be in its variety, of the demoralized *Mocking-birds* of our cities.

The *Mocking-bird* is found from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but is very rarely met with so far to the north as any part of New England, though occasionally a pair may be found breeding in Massachusetts. It is common in Cuba and in Mexico. A warm climate, a low country, and the neighborhood of the sea, appear to be congenial to their nature. In the extreme Southern States they remain throughout the year, approaching the farm-houses in winter, living in the shelter of gardens and out-buildings, and often may be seen perched upon the roofs of houses or on chimney-tops. They are always full of life and animation, and in the milder days of midwinter are often heard singing with all the life and spirit of midsummer. The *Mocking-bird* is distinguished by the grace and easy rapidity of its movements, as well as by its great intelligence. Its voice is strong, full of power, and yet at the same time wonderfully flexible, admitting of every conceivable modulation, from the shriek of the locomotive to the softest warblings of the Bluebird. The wonderful exactness of their imitations must be familiar to most of us. In their added sweetness and energy, its notes very often far surpass their originals.

The natural notes of the *Mocking-bird* are described, by those familiar enough with the song of other birds to distinguish them, as bold and full, and varied almost beyond all limitation. They consist of brief expressions, of a few syllables, generally interspersed with imitations, and are delivered with great emphasis and volubility.

The vocal powers of this bird are not confined in their exhibitions to the day. Both in their wild state and in their caged life, on bright moonlit nights, they will make their neighborhood ring with their inimitable melody, throughout the entire night. Any one who may have had occasion to pass the hours designed for slumber in the same chamber with one of these irrepressible

songsters will be likely to remember and appreciate this peculiarity.

No bird is more readily reconciled to confinement than the *Mocking-bird*, when reared from the nest. The writer once possessed one of these birds, which he had obtained, when a mere fledgling, in the market of Washington. It was perfectly domesticated, and was permitted to enjoy the entire freedom of the house. It would come at call, alight on the finger, and obey certain commands with all the alacrity and intelligent obedience of a well-trained dog.

The *Mountain Mocking-bird* has only been found in the mountainous regions of the Pacific coast, from Mexico to Oregon. It frequents the arid plains of that part of the country, and its notes have been heard and described only by the few naturalists whom love of science have led to explore those unattractive regions. It has no beauties of plumage, but is homely and possesses no other attractions than its song. When singing, it perches upon some small tree or bush; and when approached, instead of flying, alights upon the ground, and runs off with great rapidity. Dr. Kennerly, a very accurate and trustworthy naturalist, noticed great resemblance between some of its habits and those of the common *Robin*. The late Mr. Nuttall was, of all our naturalists, most familiar with its song. This he describes as most cheering, and as bearing some resemblance to the music of our *Brown Thresher*. It also possesses the imitative powers of the common *Mocking-bird*, but to what extent is not fully known.

The *Cat-bird*—we wish it enjoyed a common name better suggestive of its great merits and its many charming attributes—is our special favorite. Too interesting to be passed by in silence, it is also so familiar with us all, that we will not occupy too much of our fast-waning space with a full account of all its interesting peculiarities.

There are few of our birds which have a wider geographical range. It is found in all the Atlantic States from Florida to Maine, and in the interior is common from Louisiana to Lake Winnipeg, extending westward to Oregon and Washington Territory. It is most abundant in the more highly cultivated portions of the country, but is comparatively rare in uncultivated, wooded, or mountainous regions.

Although not generally a popular or a welcome visitor, and a victim of wide-spread, but most unjust prejudices, no bird more deserves or better repays our kindness. Its life is a perpetual warfare upon our most noxious insects, while its depredations upon our fruit are of no moment.

From its first appearance almost to its departure in the early fall, the air is vocal with its quaint and charming melody, made all the more attractive by its imitations of the notes of other birds, that blend so constantly with its own unimitative song. Its imitations, when it attempts something beyond its scope, are frequently ludicrous failures, but at other times are remarkably good. Its song is a singular medley, and its notes, both natural and imitative, combine to form a whole at once varied and attractive. Its powers of imitation, though limited, are often exercised in an amusing and successful manner. They bear, of course, no comparison with those of the *Mocking-bird*, which can repeat with marvellous exactness any note or sound, and blend them with its own with incredible facility, and with an endless variety. The more difficult notes the *Cat-bird* rarely attempts to imitate, and makes a failure of it when it does; but the whistle of the common Quail, the chuckling of the domestic hen when calling her brood, the answering cries of her chickens, the note of the *Pewit Fly-catcher*, the refrain of the *Towhee*, it can copy with so much exactness as to be hardly distinguishable from the original.

The *Cat-bird* soon ascertains where it is a welcome visitor, and is not long in making itself at home. It is perpetually in

motion, and seems often to court the society of those it trusts, approaching you with a familiarity that is irresistible. To attract your attention it will resort to a great variety of positions and attitudes, uniting these with its best musical efforts. The Capitol grounds in Washington, before the enlargement of the building, used to abound with these birds, and their familiarity and charming songs were among the chief attractions of the place. No petted opera-singer ever seemed more ambitious of the approval of her audience than did these indefatigable performers, descending often to the lowest boughs, within a few feet of one's head, and devoting their best energies to the entertainment of those who seemed attracted towards them.

We might extend indefinitely our mention of the more noteworthy song-birds; but we have already exceeded our limits. The Bobolink, and its kindred of stout-billed graminivorous singers,—the linnets, the song-sparrows, and the curious *White-throated Finch* (the *Peabody Bird* of the White Mountains),—must bide their time. The wrens too, the vireos, the meadow larks, and a host of unmentioned songsters, equal in sweetness, melody, and power to those whose excellences we have inadequately portrayed, we shall hope to introduce to our readers at some future day.

BROOKSIDE.

BY THE EDITOR.

BROOKS are summer comforters; not Brooks of Sheffield (*vide* Copperfield), nor any other mere human babblers; but brooks that bring their silvery voices from the hillsides, and change them to a sweet, mellow, tremulous sound, as they loiter away through the grassy meads. There are brooks with good names,—such as Roaring Brook and Bound Brook and Stony Brook and Red Brook (made unctuous by the trout killed there); but yet I doubt if the best brook of all is not a brook without a name, or rather a brook so near and so companionable and so loved, that it has lost its name by stress of intimacy with its prattle and its flow and its silver sheen, so that to us who know it so well, a name (whatever it may be) wears a cold, ceremonious twang, and we think of it only as — The brook. There are rivers, I know, which to those who live close upon their banks have lost whatever name the geographers may have given, and are talked of and apostrophized and remembered only — each one of them — as The River. A brook will grow into much nearer companionship, if so be we can command both the higher and the thither banks, and thus count it a possession. No dweller upon the shore of a great river can come to this feeling, whatever love he may lend to the glory of the water. Unknown neighbors are partners in ownership, and the vulgar keels of reckless boatmen may ruffle its bosom. But the brook, on which the shadows of your trees fall in the morning and fall again in the afternoon, is at once a possession and a joy; all the better, if so small that no prowling skiff can force a way over its shallows, and violate its maidenly seclusion.

It must be now twenty years or more since I laid eyes upon that gleam of meadow water which, stealing through coppice and through marsh grasses, told its silver story of THE BROOK, — the brook that has tempted this impassioned praise, — the brook where first a line was wetted, — the brook where in June (its earliest warm day) the sheep came winding from the hillside by unaccustomed ways, frightened by the shouts and looking askance at newly opened barriers, questioning the intrusion, making involved and tumultuous effort for a return, until some intrepid wether made a frolicsome leap into the new territory, when the whole flock came plunging after, and on through other

barriers and by wooded lanes, until at last all were closely kempt in the little yard which with poles and hickory withes had been extemporized upon the very edge of the brook, and beside one of its deepest pools.

Through twenty years I hear the bleating of those score of lambs, bewildered, and trotting uneasily back and forth, through and around the hurdles which shut in the ewes. Their turn for a washing, or of such of them as may escape the butcher, does not come until the next season. Through twenty years and all the mists of them, I see the old maple, with ridgy roots stretched like knotted sinews into the soft sward-land of the bank, and its great top, in all the glory of its first June leafage, leaning over the water. I see the eddies and the swirl as the brook comes swooping round a tuft of gray alders, where a red-winged black-bird has just now shown a flash of his crimson epaulets; from a tall hickory on the farther bank, and, hidden in its dense foliage, a lithe, trim cuckoo gives out a monotonous croak of rain;

“ And I can listen to thee yet,
Can lie upon the plain,
And listen till I do beget
That golden time again ”;

a pair of Phoebe birds, whose nest is under the plank bridge where the high-road crosses two rods away, flit in and out; a broad, shallow pool through which country folk drive their teams, and where mare and foal, with bent necks and forearm shortened, rejoice in the nectar of the water; two turtles with outstretched heads, who are sunning themselves upon a half-sunken log, slide lazily off and “plump” into the stream, as the mare and foal come splashing through. All this I see across twenty years, and see the blue haze that enwraps the distant woods, and elms enfolding a gray roof toward which a half-mile of path lies straight across the meadows. Through twenty years I can almost scent the green case-bottle of “black-strap” (being some mysterious mixture of rum and molasses), with which Old Si. (ordinarily a temperance man) thinks it needful to fortify himself against the chillness of the June waters and the soak of his sheep-washing.

There were those in the neighborhood, indeed, who avoided this souse into the brook, by driving their flock to a mill-dam not far away, where the trunk of a waste-way from the pond gave a three-foot fall of water, under which the struggling victims were held and the fleece squeezed; but this was an imperfect and slipshod way; Old Si. would not listen to it; it did n't half do the work; he had sheared some of “them” sheep turned out at the mill-dam, and their fleeces were full of “pesky grit.” There was nothing, he said, like a good broad pool which would take a man to his midriff, with a good shade over it, — “the like o' this 'ere maple, now,” — and quick water running away from the lower edge of the pool to carry off the “suds.” “Then,” said he, “you don't want to be *hash* in handlin' on 'em; a sheep's a tender crittur. You don't want to torment 'em by puttin' their noses under; who the — wants his nose hild under water? Wääl, don't you s'pose a sheep's got feelin' tew? You want to float 'em out easy to where the water jist begins to roughen a bit with the run down stream, then press the fleece all over, inch by inch, as you would a sponge, and you've got a fleece, arter a little, that won't dull no man's shears.”

Sheep-washing appears a delightful matter in a picture; but to stand waist-deep, for two or three hours together, in a brook that has had only a few June days to warm it, without the privilege of that constant, eager motion and change of position which relieve the angler, is a seriously chilling thing, and one which would almost excuse a resort — if anything might — to the green case-bottle that lies under the bush. It is only another type of the exceeding great contrasts which exist between pastorals on paper and pastorals in earnest. Take the labor and the exposures and the dirt and the

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